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Editor's Note

Timothy Roberts' profile of Patrick Tillman represents an unorthodox approach to the sequence assignment, profiling an individual without completing an interview, but it does incorporate quotations from and first person observation of its subject. The essay highlights Tillman's attributes within the context of the writer's prior expectations; Roberts' approach defines his subject's personality in contrast with his mistaken assumptions about someone who has achieved at least modest celebrity status. The profile also incorporates narration and cause-and-effect elements into its thesis, but the effect of having known Tillman is left undeveloped. Would development of that idea enhance the profile? Or would it weaken the essay by drawing attention away from Tillman?

Patrick Tillman

Timothy J. Roberts

Patrick Tillman: that name evokes a variety of feelings from many different people. To some, he is a hero; he is a symbol of patriotism and selflessness. Others see him as a man made into a martyr by his own government; his death became a press conference to promote good feelings for the war. Still, others see him as stupid to give up all of his wealth and fame to fight a war that no one believes in. I have met Pat and I believe him to be more of the hero. He had so many attributes that made him a hero in my eyes.

I first saw Patrick in the days before basic training actually started. Before my company could start basic, we were in a holding period to get all of our paperwork done and vaccines taken care of. I remember standing in a line and hearing others talking about some pro-football player in our class who gave it all up for a Ranger contract. Naturally, I was very intrigued, so I inquired about him. They told me that he gave up a three-million dollar contract with the Arizona Cardinals to go fight the war. I was completely astonished. I come from a middle class family in rural Wisconsin; we definitely didn't have a ton of money. It was hard to wrap my head around the fact that he gave up so much to be a regular Joe like the rest of us. Plus, I was surprised that he didn't decide to be an officer, since he had the college degree to do so. I could barely imagine what it would be like to be famous and rich and have so many guys want to be me. I was scared to talk to him, scared to even look in his direction. I'm glad that I overcame that fear. If I hadn't, I probably wouldn't be where I'm at today.

A couple of days into the paperwork and vaccines, I became extremely homesick. The four months of basic training was essentially the first time that I had been away from home for a long period of time. I just sat on my bunk and

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became withdrawn. Patrick was passing by and noticed my solemn state. He decided to stop on in and check on me. This rich, famous, muscle man decided to talk to me, the poor, unknown, skinny kid. I'll be honest; I was definitely scared at first. The man's neck was as big as my thigh. That's scary stuff. Surprisingly, he was extremely easy to talk to. Not only did he care enough to find out what was wrong, but he was also probably one of the most insightful men that I've ever met. I remember being taken aback by his maturity level. I was in awe by the way that he was so calm, collected, and knew just what to say. It was a level that I wanted to strive to be at. Pat not only got me to open up to a complete stranger, but he shared some of his own life stories with me. He didn't have to do any of this. He could have kept walking past my bunk and not cared at all. I expected him to see himself as better than the rest of us. But that wasn't the case. He accepted his role as one of us and expected no special treatment. He just wanted to be a regular Army soldier.

Patrick did an interview with MSNBC right after the attacks on September 11th. He more or less gave the impression that he would be joining the military. He stated that he had many relatives serve in the military and he "really hasn't done a damn thing" (qtd. in Johnson). He talked about the freedoms that most Americans take for granted including his own self in that list. I believe that he felt a deep conviction to not just stand by and do nothing. His statement above seems to portray a sort of remorse that he hadn't done more in terms of his country. Patrick was willing to put his money where his mouth was and I greatly respect that. Men would ask him why he joined the Army and gave up that lucrative contract. His only reply that I ever heard him say was, "I have my reasons." He didn't divulge details so there was an air of mystery about him. I think he saw his life as his own business, and he didn't feel the need to justify his actions. I see that as being amazingly mature. He didn't need to promote himself in any way. He didn't draw attention to himself by telling stories or giving out information that no one else really needed to know. If I were him, I probably would have been caught up in the spotlight. I don't think that people realize that he didn't join the Army for the press coverage. I got the feeling from him that he really didn't enjoy the press. He seemed too private of a man to want to be put in the spotlight. Like I stated before, he just wanted to be a soldier like the rest of us.

Watching him train to become that soldier was quite the experience. He of course didn't want the attention, but he definitely got it. There were two types of Drill Sergeants in our basic training class, those who worshiped Pat and tried to make life as easy as possible for him, and those who treated him a little worse than everyone else to try to test him in a way. He didn't bitch about any of it though. He took it all in stride and did his thing no matter what anyone else thought. If the drill sergeants pushed him harder, he accepted it and met their expectations to the best of his ability. One example I can remember is when

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they made him run through an exercise more than the rest of us and threw in a few curveballs to try to throw him off balance. If they tried to make it easier for him, he just pushed himself harder to show guys like me that he didn't want the special treatment. That meant a lot to me. I saw a man who could take the easy way out and just get by, but instead he chose the harder path to be the best that he could. That speaks volumes in my eyes. I've tried to emulate that trait since I met him.

Another aspect of Patrick that I've tried to duplicate was his leadership ability. He knew when to get serious and get the job done. Not everyone liked Tillman, but everyone followed him simply because he had an air about him that I can't even describe. He didn't usually have to yell at other guys to get them going, but he definitely did just that if the situation called for it. He wasn't afraid to get in other soldiers' faces if they weren't pulling their own weight. Basic training wasn't a popularity contest for him. I believe he lived his life the same way. He didn't have to be popular. I had never even heard of Patrick Tillman before I met him during basic training. I watched a lot of sports too. He just wasn't in the press that much. He lived his life according to his own standards and people would be drawn to his sincerity. There didn't appear to be a fake bone in his body, and that's what most people look for in a leader. He also didn't ask anyone to do anything that he himself wouldn't have done first. Patrick always led by example and expected others to follow. I saw him as a better leader than some of the drill sergeants that I encountered. Intensity also played a big part in his leadership abilities. When Pat went, he went all out. He went to the best of his ability. Nothing that he did was half-assed or lacking in some way. He could have breezed by during the physical training tests and done just enough to pass. That wasn't his way though. Patrick mostly ached it every time he took it. Almost every media example that he's depicted in he has this intensity about him. Patrick wasn't always the best at everything that he did, but he did put forth his best effort. That's a quality that most people don't hold. I started to learn it as I watched him during basic training. I don't think that he even realized how much influence he had on guys like me.

I only knew Patrick for a short amount of time, but he had one of the biggest impacts on my life that anyone will ever have. His leadership abilities, maturity, and intensity are all things that I will never forget. They're attributes that most people lack and that most people should strive to achieve. They were innate in him. I don't know where he learned them, but they were definitely apparent in everything that he did. He's the kind of man that fathers will tell their sons about before bed and hope that they listen carefully. If only everyone could have met him, I think this world might be a better place to live.

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Patrick Tillman was killed in Afghanistan on April 22, 2004.

You can access photographs of Tillman at http://images.usatoday.com/sports/football/nfl/_photos/2006-04-21-tillman.jpg and http://newsimg.bbc.co.uk/media/images/41111000/jpg/_41111407_ap203bodypat.jpg

Works Cited

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